

NEWS

Monday May 22, 2006

Archives
Business
Bob Dunning
Features
Health
Local news
Obituaries
Photos

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Bay Area sports
Blue Devils
Kings
River Cats

Group wants to maintain and enhance local agriculture

By Cory Golden

Enterprise staff writer
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WOODLAND — It took 18 months to get there, but the Yolo County **Ag Futures Alliance** — a group of farmers, environmentalists, community members and local officials — is ready to roll up its sleeves.

Many of the 19 volunteer alliance members were on hand here Tuesday, explaining their principles to the Yolo County Board of Supervisors and putting forth three priorities for 2006:

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- Ag land preservation, by contributing opinions about rules for compensating for developed farmland or habitat to the County's General Plan update and the ongoing habitat planning;

- Urban limit lines protecting both agriculture and open space; and

- Boosting locally produced foods for local consumption, including an effort to promote "Yolo Grown" fruits and vegetables through labels, a Web site and other promotions.

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The Yolo alliance's stated purpose: maintain and enhance agriculture and the environment here in perpetuity.

It plans to do so by providing new ideas for tough problems; developing coalitions, in part by crafting positions that "have broad enough support to be realistic"; speaking up in the public arena; educating the community; and reaching consensus to make recommendations.

A Santa Rosa-based nonprofit called the Ag Innovations Network helped create the alliance here in 2004. It provided \$25,000 in services, helping lead discussions about the challenges facing sustainable agriculture.

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Ag Innovations kick-started a similar alliance in Ventura County five years earlier. That group has sorted out such emotional issues as pesticide use near schools.

The Yolo group lacked a clear-cut issue to confront first. So during regular meetings it undertook wide-ranging discussions not just about how to work together, but where and how to get started.

Ag Commissioner Rick Landon said it wasn't always a smooth journey.

"The whole purpose is to bring to get a broad group of people together," he said, "but it is a hard process, and it took quite a bit of time."

That process was made more difficult by ongoing, hot-button political issues, like the effort to have a portion of Cache Creek declared a state-protected wild-and-scenic river and, even more trying, the Board of Supervisors' efforts to take control of Conaway Ranch.

Environmentalists and the Yolo County Farm Bureau have butted heads over both.

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Hours
Internships
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One of the Yolo AFA members, Mark Kimball of the nonprofit Center for Land Based Learning, said the alliance volunteers had to learn to "leave their organizational voices at the door" — to not just give the standard "knee-jerk reaction" of whatever groups members take part in. Instead, they needed to forge individual relationships.

"It's difficult to come in and say, 'I represent me. This is my voice,' " Kimball said.

Another member, Robert Ramming, owner of Pacific Star Gardens, pointed out that many of those who've joined the alliance are already involved with groups that are sometimes at odds, but which often have similar goals at heart.

Ramming, for example, is a member of the more right- leaning Farm Bureau, but also the more left-leaning Community Alliance for Family Farmers and organic growers organizations. Grower Charlie Rominger is active in the bureau and a member of the Sierra Club.

As individuals, then, all can contribute unique perspectives to the alliance, Ramming said.

"If we agree on something, we can propose a solution," he said. "I wouldn't call it compromise, I would call it consensus.

"Yeah, it takes a long time. Yeah, it can be frustrating. But when you have people who trust each other, solutions bubble up faster."

Having agreed on principles by which to work, Kimball said that the alliance chose priorities on which all could agree "but were still very necessary." On a topic like urban limit lines, there may be different opinion about what those limits should look like, she said, but all believe in their importance.

Those tasks done, Kimball said that she believes the AFA can now provide "a moderate voice, not a politicized voice," presenting carefully vetted positions that will help the supervisors and others craft policy.

"I find it a very exciting time because a lot is happening," Kimball said. "We all may not always agree, but people are taking action. It's a good time for an AFA."

Other members are Howard Beeman and Susan Pelican, Galaxy Farms; Anne-Marie Flynn, Yolo County Food Bank; Marcia Gibbs and Temra Costa, Community Alliance for Family Farmers; Randii MacNear, Davis Farmers' Market; Petrea Marchand, Yolo County; Don Morrill, California Wilderness Coalition; Pam Nieberg, Sierra Club; Chuck Roe, Pyramid Construction; Vance Russell, Audubon California; Bob Schneider and Debra Chase, Tuleyome; Mitch Sears, city of Davis; and Jeanette Wrysinski, Yolo County Resource Conservation District.

The alliance is now funded in part by an \$11,000 grant from the Yolo County Advisory Committee on Tribal Matters, as well as by donations from its members and other community organizations. Those interested in supporting the **Ag Futures Alliance**, or who would like more information, may contact yoloafa@agfuturesalliance.net.

— Reach Cory Golden at cgolden@davisenterprise.net

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